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INDEPENDENCE DAY IN 1797

IN

OAKHAM, MASSACHUSETTS



BY

HENRY P. WRIGHT

OAKHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1911

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THE TUTTLE, MOREHOUSE AND TAYLOR COMPANY, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

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INDEPENDENCE DAY IN 1797 IN OAKHAM

READ BEFORE THE OAKHAM FARMERS' CLUB,

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1910

Among early historical papers relating to Oakham are some that, supplemented by tradition, give a very good account of a Fourth of July celebration on this hilltop in the year 1797. The town had been settled less than fifty years, but the population was more than forty per cent larger than it is now; the three most thickly settled districts being the north, the northwest, and the southeast sections.

Within the limits of the present village, in the center of the town, were the meeting-house, the schoolhouse, the inn, and two dwelling-houses. The meeting-house, which stood a little northeast of the site of Memorial Hall, was an unpainted wooden structure, long and narrow, and blackened by thirty-five years' exposure to the weather. On account of its funereal aspect, the wags called it "the coffin-colored meeting-house." Coffins then were always black. It faced south, with the pulpit on the north side; and, as if to insure good winter ventilation in a building that was never warmed by a fire-place or a stove, there were three outside doors, each opening directly into the audience-room,—one on the south side, and one at each end. According to tradition, in the coldest winter weather the minister preached in overcoat and mittens, and during the second hour of the sermon the men in the audience sometimes had to stamp their feet on the floor to keep them warm, while

the women tried to make themselves less uncomfortable by the use of foot-stoves. On the floor of the house were twenty-six old-fashioned square pews for the better families. For those who could not afford to own pews, there were six long seats in front of the pulpit, and similar seats in the east, west, and south galleries. In all these seats the men and women were separated, the women occupying those toward the east end, and the men those toward the west. The east gallery was reached by "the women's stairs" and the west by "the men's stairs." The pulpit was high, the minister's desk being on a level with the gallery. The second public building was the center schoolhouse, on the edge of the Common and just east of the site of the Fobes Memorial Library. The inn, kept by Major Artemus Howe, was the house in which Sibley Woodis now lives. The dwelling-houses were the one now occupied by Frank Davis, once known as the "Pike house," and another at the Fairbank place, then owned by Jonathan Bullard.

The space now enclosed within the four village streets and known as "The Square" was then covered with a forest of large oak, chestnut, and hickory trees. The Common and burying ground had been cleared, but several old oaks had been left standing. There was a large black oak where the hay-scales now are, and on the Common southeast of the meeting-house were two other large oaks, about thirty feet apart, with wide-spreading branches which formed a canopy over a sort of natural auditorium sometimes called "The Bower." These two oaks were not less than two hundred years old, and were standing till about 1830. The part of the Common west of the present burying ground and church was kept smooth, and was in frequent use as a training field.

This celebration takes us back to a military age. For seventy years after the settlement of the town, the country was either engaged in war or liable to become so. Even

at this time there was great danger of a war with France.¹ Every able-bodied young man was a member of the military company of the town and was drilled in the manual of arms and company manœuvres. If he was ambitious, he studied military tactics and hoped by faithful service to be worthy sometime of promotion to military office. The most honored official of the town was the captain of the town company, who had earned a title which he could carry through life and which would be engraved on his tombstone. The captain of the Oakham company at this time was John Boyd. He was forty-six years of age, and was one of the Oakham soldiers in Captain John Crawford's company of minutemen who had marched on the Lexington alarm of April 19th, 1775. He had served also at Ticonderoga in 1776, and in other campaigns in Rhode Island and New York.²

This was an age, too, when men gave serious attention to whatever they undertook. Independence Day meant more to them than any other day of the year. It was a day hal-

¹To be in readiness for war, the soldiers were kept in regular training and a part of them were detailed and equipped to march without delay. One of the articles in the warrant for a town meeting on October 4th of this year (1797) was:—

“To see what encouragement the town will vote to give to the minutemen now called for in addition to their continental pay, if they should be called to march.

“Voted that the minutemen now raised should be made up to the ten dollars per month, including their continental pay, from the time that they shall actually march until they are dismissed.”

Oakham Town Records, Vol. II, p. 354.

² John Boyd was a man of much ability and of good education. He was a surveyor and was employed by the town for many years to make tax rates. In 1792 he was commissioned Lieutenant and in 1794 Captain of the Oakham Company of Massachusetts Militia. He was often Assessor, and was eight times Selectman of Oakham, in the years 1781, 1788, 1791, 1794, 1797, 1799, 1801, and 1802. In 1781 he was married to Judith Hall of Cornish. Captain Boyd died in Oakham, August 12, 1833, at the age of eighty-two years.

lowed by sacrifice. They had not forgotten the hardships and losses of the Revolutionary War, which had closed only fourteen years before. They were enjoying their newly earned liberties, and were proud of America. We cannot think of them as celebrating the birthday of American independence by witnessing anything that would correspond to a game of baseball, or a stage-play, or an automobile race; nor can we imagine them introducing comic features into the celebration, as we were wont to do in our recent field-days. We must expect that their celebration will be dignified and loyal, partly religious, and characterized by a martial spirit.

It is safe to say that all who attended this celebration, from whatever distance, came on foot or on horseback. The roads were not good enough to make riding in a wagon without springs as comfortable as riding on horseback, and wagons were very uncommon. As early as May 1st, 1776, Francis Maynard had driven from Rutland to Oakham in what was called in his account-book a "chaise," but the chaise belonged in Rutland. On October 28th, 1795, the mother of John Robinson rode from Northboro to Oakham in a "wagon," but this was owned in Northboro. There was probably not a four-wheeled wagon in Oakham in 1797, though there were plenty of two-wheeled carts drawn by oxen. It is worthy of notice that the people of Oakham did not take the whole of this Fourth of July for a holiday. It was the busy season of the year; they were mostly farmers, and work on the farm could not be wholly neglected.

The celebration began with religious exercises. At twelve o'clock, noon, the soldiers and citizens of this and neighboring towns gathered at the meeting-house. The veterans of the Revolution, about fifty in number, occupied the six long seats directly in front of the pulpit, while the soldiers, having stacked their arms in front of the meeting-house, marched in with their guests from neighboring towns and

took the square pews. The citizens of the town were seated in the east and west galleries, and the singers in the gallery opposite the pulpit. Father Tomlinson offered prayer and made what was termed by one who heard it a "pathetic address" to the officers and soldiers. This address is not preserved. It no doubt consisted mainly of expressions of gratitude to the Revolutionary heroes, praises of Washington and Adams, and some defence of the principles of the Federal party.³

From a Fourth of July oration delivered four years later under the oaks on the Common by Father Tomlinson, whose speech was usually plain and unadorned, the following passages are quoted as specimens of the subjects and style of Fourth of July oratory that interested the country people of that day:

America, all glorious in liberty, America, the nursery of Patriots, Science and Virtue, has echoed and re-echoed the Columbian general and his victorious army. Loquacious fame has so echoed and re-echoed, with the brilliancy of genius, the sagacity of our Washington, the jurisprudence of our legislators, and diplomatic skill of our arbiters that novelty cannot be expected, on these subjects, from the speaker. I shall not discant even on the characters the most prolific in exhibiting the sprightliness of the genius of our country, but it may be thought a crime not to mention the names of Washington and Adams, whose talents have shone with exuberant brilliancy in the political Drama.

The character of Washington has risen to the pinnacle of earthly greatness; his memory is embalmed with more than aromatic spice in the cordial affections of his Country. As a general, his sagacity supplied the want of men and warlike implements. He was wisdom in the Cabinet, heroism in the Field, the gentleman in the estimation of the *bon ton*, the scholar by the united voice of men of science, the Christian by profession. His administration was equable and propitious; his ideas truly sublime; his style *simplex munditiis*. His

³ The voters of Oakham at this time were Federalists to a man. In the presidential election held the previous year, every ballot cast was for the John Adams elector.

farewell address to the citizens of America might with propriety be written in letters of gold.

The illustrious Adams has not yet completed a character which neither malignity nor time can efface. The predominant features of his life evince a oneness of sentiment with the illustrious Washington. Decided in his administration, he has guided our political Bark through tempestuous seas, under the ensign of neutrality, to the gilded shores of peace, plenty, and fame. Neither the intrigues nor menacing threats of an opulent, victorious nation, or the domestic combinations of reviling disorganizers, changed his steady course. His enemies, being judges, applaud his stability. One adopts this expression: "As great as Washington, as stable as Adams, as wise as Jefferson." The philosophical reasoners of the age have made his attachment to religion an essential blemish in his character which disqualifies him for a ruler. Their sophistical reasonings have deluded some ignorant but honest minds into the belief that a stable attachment to religion will necessarily lead to persecution; but of all the dispositions and habits incident to man, religion is the most tolerant, and, I will add, the most essential to national prosperity.

We, my fellow citizens, are convened this day to perpetuate in memory our national birth. Sweet liberty enstamps her smiling visage on every brow. So pleasing a theme as the means by which this celestial visitant may be retained to posterity cannot be irksome to this numerous audience. Some misguided minds have entertained an opinion that parties in a nation are of real utility, serving to investigate truth and secure the liberties of the people. History, ancient and modern, furnishes us with abundant testimony what cruelty and pointed revenge the alternate dominion of factions will produce. Party spirit in any community subverts the liberties and happiness of a People, and not only terminates in, but is itself, a fruitful despotism. Felicity reposes itself in the bosom of unity and virtue. Anguish and wretchedness are the inseparable companions of discord. Partisans for jealousy against government have arisen, insinuating that the liberties of the people are in danger when jealousy slumbers. Jealousy has a jaundiced eye; will metamorphose virtue itself into the most hideous monster, and is as cruel a tyrant as sits on the throne of vice. It destroys the safety of the ruler and the enjoyment of the subject.

The means of communicating light to the rising generation and forming the tender mind to receive the principles of virtue ought to occupy the attention of every grade of people, to secure our independence and national prosperity. Indolent, dissipated persons

are a burden to the body politic, but in no situation can they be placed more hazardous to national freedom than at the head of our public schools. As is the teacher, so is the scholar. Patriotism cannot be expected, neither can it exist, in barren, unprincipled minds. National freedom can be guaranteed to posterity by cultivating the juvenile mind and instilling the principles of religion in the early period of life. What prospects are before us may be predicted from the predominant dispositions of Columbia's sons. If unprincipled *illuminati* should in some future period be preferred by the mass of people to hold the reins of government, Immorality, that demagogue of discord, will direct fatal arrows against patriotism. Religion, the parent and nurse of Republicanism, Liberty, Peace, and Happiness, will bid a final adieu to our land. Our national honor will be clad in sackcloth and ashes. If any virtuous sons remain, they may weep around the urn of liberty, clothed with penitence, but loaded with wretchedness and the galling chains of tyranny. The words of our great patriot and hero demand the attention of this assembly this day. It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring to popular government. Then let not morality be refused a seat in The Bower.

After Father Tomlinson's address, the singers sang a piece of music "suitable to the day." Whether the singing was also suitable to this day, or any other day, is not stated; it could no doubt have been much improved. At two o'clock a large number of gentlemen from New Braintree, Rutland, Brookfield and Barre dined with the officers and company on the Common. They sat on the grass under the two large oaks already mentioned, southeast of the meeting-house. Beneath the same oaks, eleven years before, the Rev. Daniel Tomlinson had been ordained as pastor of the Oakham church. Here in the summer, between the morning and afternoon services on Sunday, the people gathered to tell and hear the news. This was also a common gathering place for people who came to the center of the town on town meeting or training days, or any other public occasion. This dinner was followed by manœuvres and exercises by the Oakham company, which continued

till five o'clock. One who was present throughout the afternoon wrote regarding the celebration: "The greatest order was preserved, and the manœuvres and exercises were performed to the general acceptance."

Byron many years later wrote:

"There's naught, no doubt, so much the spirit calms
As rum and true religion."

It must be admitted that in this part of New England in 1797, the meeting-house and the tavern were not hostile forces. Only men of influence and character were licensed as innholders. The inn was a place for conviviality, but not for drunkenness, which was punished with great severity. Attendance on Sunday service was well-nigh universal, but one who was living at this time told me that he remembered only one man in town who abstained on principle from the use of spirituous liquors.

With the ideas that then prevailed, a proper celebration of this our first national holiday, therefore, could hardly come to an end without further exercises than those in the meeting-house, on the Common, and on the parade-ground. At five o'clock the soldiers and their guests formed a procession and marched to the sound of fife and drum to Major Howe's inn. Here the toasts of the day were given. In what is now Sibley Woodis's front yard, the citizens formed themselves into a semi-circular group, with a tub of punch in front. A little beyond, the soldiers were arranged in platoons. The toast-master, mounted probably on a barrel, announced the toasts in clear tone and with great dignity; to which all drank in response, after cheers by the citizens and the firing of salutes by the platoons of soldiers. How many hundreds of blank cartridges must have been shot into Prospect Hill on that patriotic afternoon! At a much later period, when the Oakham company was firing by platoons on the parade ground, a clumsy soldier left his

ramrod in his gun-barrel and shot it across the Park into the roof of the village hotel (later Mr. Wheeler's Park View Inn). This unexpected bombardment of the hotel greatly lessened the interest of the spectators, who were gathered in front of the building, none of whom waited to witness another shot.

There were sixteen toasts in all, as follows :

1. Independence: the day we celebrate. May American independence ever felicitate a free, virtuous, and independent people, under virtuous laws. Three cheers.

2. The Federal Government. May the boon of Federalism chase discordant gloom from Columbia's sons, and friendship entwine the sister states. Three cheers.

3. George Washington, whose brilliant virtues have dignified the human race, and eclipsed the glory of heroes and statesmen. May his private retreat be accompanied with the gratitude of freemen, and the blessings of his Creator, and the same laurels shroud his grave. Nine cheers.

4. The President. May his tried patriotism embellish the federal chair, and wisdom guide him through the sable aspects of impending foreign storms. Three cheers.

5. The Vice President, Senate, and House of Representatives. May the shocks of foreign earthquakes never shake the guardians of our country. Three cheers.

6. America's freeborn sons. May virtue be their rural shades at home, their crown in foreign courts, and a sweet perfume for immortality. Three cheers.

7. The Republics of France and America. May the clouds of misunderstanding soon be dispersed, and a sincere, equitable, and perpetual alliance be the result. Three cheers.

8. Gen. Pinckney. May his patriotism meet its just reward, the approbation of his countrymen. Six cheers.

9. The Government and people of Massachusetts. May they rise above faction and discord. Three cheers.

10. The agriculture of America. May encouragement be given to sow, those who sow reap, and the world be filled with plenty. Three cheers.

11. Commerce. May our flag wave over every ocean. Three cheers.

12. May our brave seamen want neither courage nor will to protect our flag against all insults. Three cheers.

13. The Militia of the United States. May it prove a bulwark against all invaders. Three cheers.

14. The Patriots of '75. Three cheers.

15. May the memory of those heroes, who have fallen in the cause of their country, be preserved inviolate. Three cheers.

16. The American Fair. May their innocence be cherished and defended; and may industry and economy be found in all our habitations. Nine cheers.

In explanation of toasts three, four, five and eight, it may be noted that Washington had closed his second term as President two months before, and John Adams of Massachusetts, a Federalist, had been inaugurated as President. Thomas Jefferson, anti-Federalist, was Vice President. Gen. C. C. Pinckney of South Carolina, a Federalist, had been appointed United States Minister to France the preceding year, but the feeling against America was such that France would not receive him. On his return home he was appointed Major General of the United States Army. He was the Federalist candidate for Vice President in 1800, and for President in 1804 and 1808. It was Gen. Pinckney who replied to a suggestion that peace might be purchased with money, "Millions for defence, but not a cent for tribute."

The toasts to Washington, Pinckney and the ladies were plainly the most popular. There was at that time no sympathy in this region with the party headed by Jefferson, but in these toasts that party is treated with respect. A few years later, men expressed more openly and freely their utter contempt for their political opponents. Charles Prentiss delivered a poem at Brookfield on Independence Day, 1813, which was published "by request." In his notes on his poem he calls Jefferson's first inaugural address "that elaborate tissue of open falsehood and consummate hypocrisy." The following was one of the toasts at a Hardwick celebration on July 4th, 1812: "James Madi-

son—It is not the most distinguishing trait of his character that he does wrong by design, but that he should never do right by mistake.” The party of Jefferson had no less contempt for the Federalists. Page, in his history of Hardwick (p. 281, n.), quotes a toast once proposed by an anti-Federalist in a neighboring town: “The Federalists—may they die and be buried, and sleep till the Resurrection, and if God hasn’t a better opinion of them than I have he won’t call on them then.”

It is evident that the women and children had no share in this celebration. It was purely a man’s affair, limited to the soldiers of Oakham and gentlemen of this and neighboring towns. The last toast, to the ladies, was given in their absence. Men and women did not associate together, outside the families, as freely as they do now. Their interests were different, and they had not so much in common. The men had their sports, such as wrestling, hunting and fishing, their gatherings at the inns, their training days. With neighborly kindness they helped each other in clearing the land, picking stones, and building houses. In these occupations the women had no part. The women had their quilting bees and other gatherings for gossip and household work, in which the men had no part. While there was a certain assumed inferiority of women, they were treated with great outward respect and their presence as lookers-on at Major Howe’s inn, amid cheering men and firing platoons of soldiers, would have seemed very much out of place. Nor was there any thought of using the day to teach the children, all American born, the cost and value of their liberties. They heard that every day in school; it was common talk at home, and there was no danger of their forgetting it.

As for Major Howe’s punch, I do not think it likely that any soldier or citizen would consume an excessive amount of it. All the ingredients, except water, cost high and

were used sparingly. With no ice to keep it cool, it would not improve as that hot afternoon wore on. The punch served at soldiers' musters had a wide reputation for weakness. It is related that at a Connecticut muster, the Colonel's horse on one occasion drank a painful without affecting its gait in the slightest on the subsequent parade.

This celebration, held so many years ago, was a very sincere and hearty observance of Independence Day, with all that it meant to those early patriots. There were the devotional exercises, the patriotic address, the manœuvres of the soldiers, the dinner, and the toasts, with punch, loud cheers, and volleys of musketry. It was hospitable; gentlemen from this and neighboring towns were especial guests of the soldiers. It was at the same time religious and convivial. It was perfectly natural, as customs then were, that it should begin with prayer in the meeting-house and end with punch at the tavern. This kind of patriotic observance of the nation's holiday may seem strange to us, but not more so than our field-days or our celebrations on the Fourth of July would have seemed to the men of 1797. Ideas and customs have changed much in one hundred and thirteen years, some for the better and some for the worse. No New England town would now include even a mild indulgence in any form of spirituous liquor in its program for a Fourth of July celebration; but in this age of peace and prosperity we are in danger of forgetting that American liberty was obtained at great cost. We have less appreciation than our fathers had of a government by the people, and much less reverence for things that ought to be held sacred. We celebrate the nation's birthday with no prayer or psalm, and with little thought of its origin and meaning; and what have we to say in defense of the destruction of property on this our chief holiday, and the losses of life and limb, which in a period of eight years were at least one third as great as the losses in battle on the American side during

the entire eight years of the Revolutionary War?⁴ If the celebration of 1797 seems strange to us, will not our noisy, insane, and unpatriotic Fourth of July demonstrations seem far more strange to people who dwell here one hundred and thirteen years hence?

⁴The losses on the American side in the fifty land battles of the Revolutionary War have been estimated at: Killed in action and mortally wounded, 3,800; wounded, 8,200.

The losses due to the celebration of Independence Day during the eight years, 1903-1910, as given in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, were: Killed (including those who died as the result of their wounds), 1,662; injured, 35,620. Of the deaths, 968 were from tetanus. Of the injured, 2,646 met with irreparable losses: 551 lost one eye; 122 lost both eyes; 1,973 lost arms, legs, hands, or fingers. As a result of the nation-wide campaign for a "safe and sane Fourth," the number of deaths has decreased from 466 in 1903 to 57 in 1911, and the number of injured from 5,308 in 1906 to 1,546 in 1911.



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